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I'VE GOT A LONG WRRAY TO GO YET; MP Jimmy talks for the first time about his stroke, his family and the condition that blights his littleboy's progress; Features

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Body

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MP Jimmy Wray always felt reassured by a soothsayer's prediction that he would live a long life.

That was until three months ago, when he staggered down stairs in the grip of a stroke.

The fortune-teller's promise of longevity seemed suddenly empty when confronted with the possibility that he might die.

At the forefront of Jimmy's mind was his wife Laura, 25 years his junior and the mother of his five-year-old son Frankie.

'You think about how serious it might be and actually you think more about the other people in your life than yourself,' he said.

'Laura and Frankie were the first two people I worried about. The whole thing made me very emotional.

'I cried because I thought my life might end and that's very sad.'

He has had his share of personal, very public dramas, but the stroke has been the most threatening.

After all, the Labour MP for Baillieston was never going to die from the long-running feud with his ex-wife, his libel action or the trauma of Laura being stalked.

Jimmy was in his glorious five-bedroom home in Newton Mearns, near Glasgow, when he suddenly felt ill. 'I had just got up and I felt very strange. I didn't know what it was, only that it wasn't right,' he recalled.

His 37-year-old daughter Jacqueline, from his first marriage, was in the house at the time.

He said: 'I didn't want to worry her but I told her to get an ambulance right away.'

The problem, it transpired, was a clot in his neck blocking the blood flow to his brain, and it - had been there for a while.

Doctors at Glasgow's Victoria Infirmary said he would be in for months. He was paralysed down his right side, his mouth was numb and drooped and his speech slurred.

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He said: 'If I hadn't had a strong heart I really don't think I would have survived it.'

But as Jimmy says, he is 'only 66' and bolstered by the same determination that took him from Gorbals coalman to Westminster politician.

Sitting in one of his eight spacious, downstairs rooms, he looks better, if a little tired. He's still a big man but not the boulder of bulk he was, having shed half a stone.

Every instruction the doctors gave him, he followed to the letter until the feeling in his body returned.

Now he cycles 15 minutes every day on the exercise bike. He recently laid the turf on his lawn and he still takes his constituency surgeries.

His mates have rallied round, too. Rangers manager Alex McLeish sent him flowers in hospital, as did his old friend, top boxing promoter Frank Warren.

Jimmy said: 'Many people supported me and wished me well, and it gave me such a boost.

'And I have been determined to get better. The doctors can't believe it has been a miraculous recovery.'

Jimmy has always been pretty healthy. He smoked his last cigarette 10 years ago and is a moderate drinker. He will have an operation to remove the clot, but for all his bravado the incident has shaken him.

Jimmy said: 'I am not the same. I still have to build my confidence up. But then it has only been three months.'

With typical frankness, he says he would want Laura to marry again if he died and he has made sure his family will be well cared for.

He added: 'The dead are of no use to anyone. I wouldn't expect Laura to be single for the rest of her life.'

But that's a long way off and he is already planning to run at the next election, after a 20 year career in politics. He said: 'I will retire when the constituency says so.

Politics have been my life and I have served my time.'

Jimmy was a vocal opponent of the Iraq conflict but still describes Tony Blair as 'an honest, courageous leader' although 'I don't have much time for Bush'.

He still loves politics but it was his wife and family that made him determined to make a full recovery. He sometimes wonders why the elegant lawyer puts up with him at all.

Jimmy admits to being short-tempered when faced with the frustration of being ill. And as well as his impatience, Laura has had to put up with a lot.

There was the tacky battle between Jimmy and his ex-wife Catherine who took him to an industrial tribunal six years ago after she was sacked as his secretary. It was at the tribunal that he announced, rather crassly, to the waiting newsmen that Laura was four months pregnant.

Then came his pounds 60,000 libel win against the Sunday newspaper which carried Catherine's false claims that he had been violent.

Not to mention the legal restraining order they had to take out against Fiona Harvey, a former employee of Laura's who stalked her.

Harvey even called in social workers, claiming Frankie was being ill-treated.

Laura rolls her eyes when she's reminded of the exhausting roller-coaster of it all.

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She said: 'Sometimes it has felt like being at the centre of a cheap soap opera. There certainly hasn't been a dull moment.'

But Laura has no time for dramas. Looking after Frankie swallows up the majority of her time.

He suffers from the condition dispraxia which is thought to affect up to 10 per cent of the population and up to two per cent severely. Dispraxia has slowed Frankie's development, but only time will tell to what degree.

For the first 18 months, he lay flat on his back and was considered unlikely to walk but he did.

He has poor motor skills and he moves constantly, meaning he has to sleep in a big cot to stop him wriggling out of bed .

And he has practically no speech, although Jimmy says he manages to call him 'dode'.

LAURA said: 'He can't co-ordinate, so he can't do sign language, but I have become attuned to what he needs. I do have to watch him all the time because he could hurt himself.'

They bought Frankie a terrier, he has his own large playroom and three acres of garden to play in.

In so many ways his life is idyllic. He is loving and affectionate and the core of their world. Laura said: 'I know there are children more severely disabled than him, so I think you have to take the positive out of it.'

'He is a very sunny and happy little boy.' Frankie has no idea his dad has been ill, but the stroke scared Laura. She said: 'I thought 'what more can I take?' Looking after Frankie is a lot of pressure. I don't know how I would have coped if Jimmy had stayed sick, or worse, I - had been left on my own.'

'My worry now is that Jimmy will overdo things.'

She once said that she would never live in the house that Jimmy lovingly built more than 20 years ago because his two ex-wives had lived there.

But they reached a compromise and she agreed to move in if he let her transform its slightly garish, ranch style to an understated, rural elegance.

Their differences are stark and yet the house, like their marriage, has clicked in to place.

Jimmy now wants to wallow in that contentment for a while.

He said: 'The fortune-teller told me the man waiting to fill my shoes will have a long wait. I still believe that. I'm not going anywhere yet.'

CAPTION(S):

ONE: Laura and Jimmy pose happily with son Frankie. But it has been an exhausting time for Laura as she has nursed and cared for both through their illnesses; ON KEY: Jimmy Wray with son Frankie, and, right, with his ex-wife Catherine and their pet pooch before their divorce; TERROR: How the Record reported that a stalker was making their life hell

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